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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [KWBG](#) [KPAL](#) [EG](#) [IS](#)  
SUBJECT: ISRAELIS ASSIST THE RETURN OF MORE THAN 6,000  
PALESTINIANS TO THE GAZA STRIP

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones. Reasons: 1.4 (b)(d).

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SUMMARY  
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1. (S) Cooperating with Egyptian counterparts across the border and the Palestinian Authority, since July 29 Israeli security forces have returned to the Gaza Strip over 6,000 Palestinians who were trapped in Egypt and the Sinai as a result of the June Hamas takeover in Gaza. The Palestinians are transferred at the Nitzana crossing on the Egypt-Israel border, where their identities are checked against Israeli "wanted persons" lists. They and their personal belongings are then transferred by Israeli bus to the Erez crossing at the northern end of the Israel-Gaza border. The Palestinians are then sent into the Gaza Strip, where they are reportedly inspected by Hamas representatives before proceeding on their way. With the exception of a brief radio announcement on the first day, the Israelis have kept this operation quiet. Israeli contacts have noted that, to the best of their knowledge, Hamas has not attacked any of the returning Palestinians. END SUMMARY.

2. (S) Since July 29, Israeli security forces, cooperating with their Egyptian counterparts have transferred over 6,000 Palestinians stranded in the Sinai and Egypt back into the Gaza Strip. In a meeting devoted to other issues, Israeli MOD POL-MIL Bureau Chief MGEN (Res.) Amos Gilad told Acting Defense Attache August 7 that he was the architect of the ongoing Israeli operation whereby Palestinians stranded in Egypt after the June takeover of the Gaza Strip by Hamas are being returned to the Gaza Strip through Israel. (NOTE: After Hamas took over the Gaza Strip in June, the Rafah border crossing between Egypt and the Gaza Strip was closed. At least 6,000 Palestinians were thus left stranded in the Sinai and Egypt. Since then, many remained encamped outside the Rafah crossing, El Arish, and others settled down temporarily in locations as far away as Cairo. END NOTE.) Gilad explained that it is in Israel's interests, under the current policy to isolate Hamas, to control the intake and movement of the Palestinians through Israel to the Gaza Strip as this reduces the pressure to reopen the Rafah crossing.

3. (S) The first Israeli intake and transfer of Palestinians from the Egyptian side of the border to the Gaza Strip took place on July 29 -- described by Israeli sources as a pilot test. The only press notice of the initiative was a mid-day Israeli radio announcement. While the Israelis were concerned that Hamas might shell the Erez crossing during the operation, there were reportedly no such incidents then, and have been none since. (NOTE: There was an earlier plan in mid-July to return the Palestinians to the Gaza Strip through the Kerem Shalom crossing, but it was abandoned after Hamas shelled the crossing as the operation was about to begin. END NOTE.) Since the initial transfer, Palestinians have been received in Israel and moved to the Gaza Strip on almost

a daily basis. They enter at a crossing manned by Egyptian and Israeli security guards at Nitzana (infrequently used until July 29) where their identity papers are reviewed and they are checked against Shin Bet "wanted persons" lists. Their goods are then screened, palletized and loaded onto cargo trucks. The Palestinians and their goods are then moved by Israeli busses overland to the Erez crossing at the northern end of the Gaza-Israel border, where Israeli security forces control both sides of the crossing. The Palestinians and their goods are then processed through the Erez crossing into the Gaza Strip. According to sources in the office of the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Occupied Territories (COGAT), by August 9, 6,337 Palestinians who had been stranded in Egypt had returned to the Gaza Strip through the Erez crossing. On August 9 alone, 475 Palestinians were returned. The previous day, 822 Palestinians had been returned.

14. (S) Israeli security sources at Erez have told DAO Tel Aviv that they have not seen any specific incidents of Hamas targeting the returning Palestinians. These sources assume that the Egyptians are in contact with Hamas, and believe that the lack of attacks against Erez -- even though Hamas is fully capable -- further indicates a Hamas decision not to challenge the operation. Israeli sources have also observed what appeared to be Hamas militants checking the papers of returning Palestinians at a distance from the Erez crossing on the Gaza side.

15. (S) The Israelis believe Erez is the most secure crossing between the Gaza Strip and Israel, especially as Israel is capable of controlling the space on the Gaza side of the crossing well into the abandoned industrial zone. Erez was specifically built for the throughflow of people. Emergency

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medical supplies and medical patients have been transferred through Erez for some time as well. The transfer of the Palestinian returnees also affords Israeli Border Guards, Customs officials, soldiers and other security personnel at Nitzana the opportunity to screen the returnees against Israeli wanted persons lists, although we have not seen any reports of Palestinians being detained by Israel during this operation. The continued success of the operation also keeps pressure down to reopen Rafah (which has been closed for over 60 days). For Gilad and other Israeli officials, keeping Rafah closed is critical to increase pressure on Hamas and prevent the flow of money, explosives and terrorists into the Gaza Strip.

16. (S) With the exception of the brief July 29 radio announcement in Israel on the first day of the transfer, neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis have publicized it. As the operation is working, there is little interest on the Israeli side to potentially "rock the boat" by making the operation known at this time. The operation is open-ended and will probably remain so until such time as the Israelis believe all the Palestinians stranded outside the Gaza Strip (excluding those on Israeli "wanted persons" lists) have been returned, a security incident happens, or the Rafah crossing re-opens. We may expect that at some future date (e.g., after the operation terminates) the Israelis may draw attention to it and claim credit for its success.

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